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## SOME MEMORIES OF LINCOLN.

BY EX-SENATOR JAMES F. WILSON.

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THE raid made by the Confederate General, J. E. B. Stuart, in June, 1862, around the Union army commanded by General McClellan, caused great anxiety in Washington. One of its results was the interruption of communications between the capital and the Army of the Potomac. What this portended no one could affirm. That it suggested the gravest possibilities was felt by all. President Lincoln was profoundly disturbed and greatly depressed, as were all about him. Every person was anxious for news from the army, though each feared its coming; for it was expected to herald disaster.

While this feeling was dominating all circles several gentlemen, myself among them, called on President Lincoln in order to be definitely advised about the condition of affairs as understood by him. We were admitted to his presence at once. Upon entering the room where he received us, we discerned that he regarded the situation as of the gravest import. Intense anxiety was written in every line of his troubled face.

To our question: "Mr. President, have you any news from the army?" he sadly replied: "Not one word; we can get no communication with it. I do not know that we have an army; it may have been destroyed or captured, though I cannot so believe, for it was a splendid army. But the most I can do now is to hope that serious disaster has not befallen it."

This led to a somewhat protracted conversation relative to the general condition of our affairs. It was useless to talk about the Army of the Potomac; for we knew nothing concerning its condition or position at that moment. The conversation therefore took a wide range and touched upon the subject of slavery, about which much was said. The proposition was advanced that

the nation should take immediate and resolute ground for its utter extinction from the limits of the republic. The emancipation proclamation of the President was heartily commended ; but it was insisted that the proclamation did not meet the full requirements of the case, and could not be made to answer the demands of the aroused moral sense of the nation, and that, therefore, the President, Congress, and the loyal States should act together for the extermination of slavery.

The President did not participate in this conversation. He was an attentive listener, but gave no sign of approval or disapproval of the views which were expressed. At length one of the active participants remarked :

“Slavery must be stricken down wherever it exists in this country. It is right that it should be. It is a crime against justice and humanity. We have tolerated it too long. It brought this war upon us. I believe that Providence is not unmindful of the struggle in which this nation is engaged. If we do not do right I believe God will let us go our own way to our ruin. But, if we do right, I believe He will lead us safely out of this wilderness, crown our arms with victory, and restore our now dissevered Union.”

I observed President Lincoln closely while this earnest opinion and expression of religious faith was being uttered. I saw that it affected him deeply, and anticipated, from the play of his features and the sparkle of his eyes, that he would not let the occasion pass without making some definite response to it. I was not mistaken. Mr. Lincoln had been sitting in his chair, in a kind of weary and despondent attitude while the conversation progressed. At the conclusion of the remarks I have quoted, he at once arose and stood at his extreme height. Pausing a moment, his right arm outstretched towards the gentleman who had just ceased speaking, his face aglow like the face of a prophet, Mr. Lincoln gave deliberate and emphatic utterance to the religious faith which sustained him in the great trial to which he and the country were subjected. He said:

“My faith is greater than yours. I not only believe that Providence is not unmindful of the struggle in which this nation is engaged ; that if we do not do right God will let us go our own way to our ruin ; and that if we do right He will lead us safely out of this wilderness, crown our arms with victory, and

restore our dissevered union, as you have expressed your belief ; but I also believe that He will compel us to do right in order that He may do these things, not so much because we desire them as that they accord with His plans of dealing with this nation, in the midst of which He means to establish Justice. I think He means that we shall do more than we have yet done in furtherance of His plans, and He will open the way for our doing it. I have felt His hand upon me in great trials and submitted to His guidance, and I trust that as He shall further open the way I will be ready to walk therein, relying on His help and trusting in His goodness and wisdom."

The manner of this delivery was most impressive, and as Mr. Lincoln resumed his seat he seemed to have recovered from the dejection so apparent when we entered the room. With a reassured tone and manner, he remarked :

"The Army of the Potomac is necessary to our success ; and though the case at this moment looks dark, I can but hope and believe that we will soon have news from it relieving our present anxiety. Sometimes it seems necessary that we should be confronted with perils which threaten us with disaster in order that we may not get puffed up and forget Him who has much work for us yet to do. I hope our present case is no more than this, and that a bright morning will follow the dark hour that now fills us with alarm. Indeed, my faith tells me it will be so."

During the day advices were received from the army and soon thereafter the aspect of our military affairs gave renewed hope that the portent of disaster would be dispelled by substantial success. This was realized in the battle of Malvern Hill. And on the first day of the next session of Congress a movement was started which culminated in the amendment of the Constitution whereby slavery was abolished.

President Lincoln's profound respect for the Constitution of his country was made manifest on many occasions and in many ways. He had a lively regard for the rights of the citizen under it. I doubt if he performed any act as President which gave him more serious concern than did the one by which he suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*. This act interfered with the personal liberty of the citizen, and prevented his resort to courts for protection. I had numerous conversations with the President on this subject. He was sensitive under the criticisms to which his act suspending

the great writ was subjected. During a conversation had with him near the close of the year 1863, I became advised of the depth of his feeling in this regard. As we were proceeding, he put to me, with some abruptness, this interrogative statement:

“I suppose you have read some of my official papers?”

“Mr. President,” I replied, “I believe that I have read all of your official papers that have been made public.”

“Well,” he responded, “that is more than I should have expected of any one; for I guess some of them were hardly worth the reading, though I meant each one should be; but as I have so much to think about and do, I would be more than mortal to think well and do well on all occasions and subjects. But, as you say you have read all of my published official papers, tell me frankly which one you regard most favorably.”

My answer was ready, and I gave it in these words: “Mr. President, your letter of the 13th of June last, in reply to the one signed by Erastus Corning and others, whereby they communicated to you the resolutions of the Albany meeting relative to the arrest of Mr. Vallandigham is, in my judgment, your best paper.”

Without allowing me opportunity to explain the grounds on which I based my opinion, he, with some indication of gratification, remarked:

“I am glad you think so, and I agree with you. I put that paper together in less time than any other one of like importance ever prepared by me.”

He then explained how the paper had been prepared. Turning to a drawer in the desk at which he was sitting and pulling it partly out, he said:

“When it became necessary for me to write that letter, I had it nearly all in there,” pointing to the drawer, “but it was in disconnected thoughts, which I had jotted down from time to time on separate scraps of paper. I had been worried a good deal by what had been said in the newspapers and in Congress about my suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*, and the co-called arbitrary arrests that had followed. I did not doubt my power to suspend the writ, nor the necessity which demanded its exercise. But I was criticised harshly, and sometimes by men from whom I expected more generous treatment, and who ought to have known more and better than the character of their expressions indicated. This caused me to examine and re-examine the sub-

ject. I gave it a great deal of thought ; I examined and studied it from every side ; indeed, it was seemingly present with me continually. Often an idea about it would occur to me which seemed to have force and make perfect answer to some of the things that were said and written about my actions. I never let one of those ideas escape me, but wrote it on a scrap of paper and put it in that drawer. In that way I saved my best thoughts on the subject, and, you know, such things often come in a kind of intuitive way more clearly than if one were to sit down and deliberately reason them out.

“To save the results of such mental action is true intellectual economy. It not only saves time and labor, but also the very best material the mind can supply for unexpected emergencies. Of course, in this instance, I had to arrange the material at hand, and adapt it to the particular case presented. But that was an easy task compared with what immediate original composition of such a paper would have been. I am satisfied with the result, and am content to abide the judgment of the future on that paper, and of my action on the great subject and grave question to which it relates. Many persons have expressed to me the opinion you have of that paper, and I am pleased to know that the present judgment of thoughtful men about it is so generally in accord with what I believe the future will, without serious division, pronounce concerning it. I know that I acted with great deliberation and on my conscience when I suspended the writ of *habeas corpus*. It was with great reluctance that I came to recognize the necessity which demanded it. But when that became plain to my mind I did not hesitate to do my duty. I have had to do many unpleasant things since the country imposed on me the task of administering the government, and I will continue to do them when they come in the line of my official duty, always with prayerful care, and without stopping to consider what personal result may come to me.”

President Lincoln's solicitude for the welfare of the private soldiers of the Union Army was always active. Many facts illustrative of this have been given publicity. He did not lack appreciation of the necessity of discipline ; but he recognized the difficulty attending the application of the rigid rules and regulations that had been formulated for the government of the regular army to the masses of men suddenly called from the freedom of

civil life into the military service. Hence the many instances in which he interposed his power to save private soldiers from penalties imposed by military tribunals.

Once I had occasion to apply for the removal of a charge of desertion which stood against a private soldier on the rolls of his company and regiment. The soldier had left his command, and visited his home in the State of Iowa, on sick furlough. He did not return to his company for several weeks after his furlough had expired. The cause of delay was continued sickness. Knowing the consequences that would follow upon absence after such expiration without proper explanation, the soldier had endeavored to keep his officers informed of his condition and of his inability to return. This he did by forwarding each week a surgeon's certificate of his continuing disability. As soon as he became able to travel he left his home, and, without further delay, rejoined his company and reported for duty. He was surprised to find that he was borne on the rolls as a deserter. The surgeon's certificates which he had obtained and forwarded had failed to reach the proper officer, and he technically was a deserter; nevertheless, he was allowed to go on duty. He at once prepared in writing a statement of his case, which he sent to his father, with a request that it be placed in my hands for presentation to the Secretary of War with a view to the removal of the charge of desertion. The soldier's father and myself lived in the same town, and our residences were but a few steps apart. Hence, inasmuch as I was at home during the time covered by the soldier's furlough, his detention by sickness after its expiration, and his return to his company, and as I frequently visited in his father's family during that period, I had personal knowledge of the facts in his case.

Soon after the papers had been placed in my possession, I proceeded to Washington, to be present at the opening of a session of Congress, then near at hand. One of the first duties to which I gave attention after my arrival at the capital was the presentation of the case of the son of my neighbor to the Secretary of War. I called on Secretary Stanton at the War Department. I found him very busy and in one of his bad moods. His office was full of senators, representatives, and other persons having business to transact with him. His manner was brusque to some, and not very courteous to any on that occasion. I had often seen him in such moods, and

considering the character of his duties, the multiplied cares that crowded upon him, and the condition of our military affairs, I rather wondered that he ever appeared other than he seemed that morning.

After disposing of the visitors who had precedence of me, he addressed me, and in response I briefly stated the cause of my visit, and reached the papers in the case to him. With an abrupt motion of his hand he declined to receive them ; and with nervous irritability said :

“ Ah, this is the case of a deserter, is it ? I want nothing to do with it. We are having too many of them now. We had better make a few examples by shooting a deserter now and then. That might put a stop to the business.”

To this outburst of feeling I answered : “ Mr. Secretary, this is not the case of a deserter, except in the narrowest and most technical sense.”

“ That is what they all say,” he replied. “ Every man of them, when caught, or in hiding and asking for relief, has some plausible excuse. I have no time to spare for the consideration of the cases of men who run away from their duty.”

My response was : “ Mr. Secretary, I have personal knowledge of the facts presented in this case, and I tell you that it is a proper one for you to heed and remedy. Doubtless, some bad cases come to you for relief ; but this is not one of that kind. I know its character and present it to you on the basis of my personal knowledge.”

The statement made no impression on him, and, turning from me, he was about to give his attention to others in waiting, when I remarked :

“ Mr. Secretary, you are hasty and unjust. This case cannot be brushed aside in that way ; I know its merits, and will carry it to the President, who is deliberate and just, and I will get his order directing you to amend the record and place this soldier right on the rolls.”

With more than usual emphasis, and with apparent irritation, he said :

“ Go to the President, if you please ; I will not consider the case, nor will I execute such an order.”

In the act of turning away from the vexed Secretary, I remarked :



“Yes, I will go to the President, state the case to him, and request him to read these papers. There can be no doubt as to the result. He will make the proper order and deal justly by the soldier. But he shall not do it without first having been told all that has passed between us; for he shall not be misled, nor act without knowledge of each and every feature of the case.”

Proceeding at once to the Executive Mansion, I placed the papers in the hands of the President. He read them, and said:

“If the statements herein made are true, this soldier ought to be relieved; for he is in no proper sense a deserter. He seems to have done all that he could do to comply with the regulations governing such cases, and to discharge his duty. Are you sure that the facts are correctly stated?”

To this question my answer was: “I have personal knowledge that all of the material facts are true as stated in the papers you have read”; and I explained the sources of my knowledge.

The President handed me the papers, requesting me to endorse on them the statement I had made, which I did; and, after signing my name to it, I handed the papers back to him. He was proceeding to endorse the proper order on them, when I requested him to stay his hand for a moment that he might be placed in possession of some further facts connected with the case. He complied with the request, and I gave him a circumstantial statement of my interview with the Secretary of War. It seemed to interest him. At its conclusion he made no remark, but endorsed and signed the order as requested. He then returned the papers to me, quaintly remarking:

“Your persistence in this case is right. There is the order, and I guess it will be obeyed.”

I thanked the President, and was about to depart, when it occurred to me that another question and answer might be of some service. I asked him what I should do in case the Secretary of War should decline to execute the order. He promptly replied:

“Report the fact to me, but I guess he will obey that order. I know it is a small thing, as some would look at it, as it only relates to a private soldier, and we have hundreds of thousands of them. But the way to have good soldiers is to treat them rightly. At all events that is my order in this case. Let me know what comes of it.”

The result of this interview was promptly reported to the Sec-

retary of War. The papers were placed before him and his attention directed to the endorsement of the President. He read it and evidently was vexed, for with a noticeable degree of feeling he repeated the declaration that he would not execute the order. A circumstantial statement was then made to him of the interview with the President, nothing being omitted. This did not seem to affect the Secretary nor move him to compliance. After waiting a moment, and seeing no indication of action on his part, I picked up the papers, remarking as I did so :

“ Mr. Secretary, as you decline to obey the President’s order to you, I will obey the one he gave to me, and report the result of this interview to him at once.”

Leaving the Secretary’s room I proceeded down the stairway leading to the first floor of the Department, intending to go directly to the Executive Mansion with my report of the foregoing interview and ascertain the further purpose of the President. Before I reached the outer door of the Department a messenger overtook me and said the Secretary desired to see me. Returning to his room I found him apparently in better mood and his manner greatly changed. He pleasantly requested me to give him the papers in the case, and I passed them to him. Without further remark he endorsed on them directions to the Adjutant-General to execute the President’s order. This done he turned to me and said :

“ It seems to me that the President would rather have a fuss with anybody than miss a chance to do a kindness to a private soldier. But I suppose this case is all right. At all events I like your dogged persistence in it, and we will be good friends.”

And so we ever after were.

Other matters caused me to call on the President some days after this occurrence. At the conclusion of our conversation relative to the object of my visit, he said :

“ How did you get on with the Secretary of War in that soldier’s case you had here the other day ? ”

I reported the interview and stated the result.

“ Well,” he replied, “ I am glad you stuck to it, and that it ended as it did ; for I meant it should so end if I had to give it personal attention. A private soldier has as much right to justice as a Major-General.”

JAMES F. WILSON.